



## Getting Real On The Terrorism Threat To The United States

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August 23, 2016

*Editor's Note: Welcome to the fourth installment in our new series, "Course Correction," which features adapted articles from the Cato Institute's recently released book, Our Foreign Policy Choices: Rethinking America's Global Role. The articles in this series challenge the existing bipartisan foreign policy consensus and offer a different path.*

Objectively speaking, the hazard posed by terrorism to the United States is popularly perceived to be far more dangerous than it actually is. Regardless of the statistics and facts, public fears persist at high levels, impelling political posturing and irresponsible policymaking.

Even including the 9/11 attacks (which proved to be an aberration, not a harbinger), an American's chance of being killed within the United States by a terrorist of any motivation over the last few decades is about one in four million per year. For industrial accidents, it's one in 53,000, homicides, one in 22,000, auto accidents, one in 8,200. Since 9/11, an American's chance of being killed by an Islamist terrorist is about one in 40 million per year.

There was great alarm, of course, in the wake of 9/11, when the intelligence community was certain that an even more destructive "second-wave" attack was imminent and when it informed reporters that between 2,000 and 5,000 trained al-Qaeda operatives were on the loose in the United States.

In the ensuing 15 years, not only has no second wave taken place, and not only did those thousands of trained operatives never materialize, but al-Qaeda has singularly failed to successfully execute an attack in the United States.

True, there have been several dozen disconnected plots by homegrown would-be Islamist terrorists in the United States since 9/11, some of them inspired by al-Qaeda. However, few of them have been successful. Even those tragic few that have resulted in violence have caused limited damage in total—on average, some seven deaths per year. Most of the plots have been disrupted, but even if they had been able to proceed further, it seems clear that most of the plotters were pathetic. When these cases are examined, the vast majority of the offenders turn out to have been naive, amateurish, inept, and gullible. Their schemes, when unaided by facilitating FBI infiltrators, have been incoherent and clumsy, their capacity to accumulate weaponry

rudimentary, and their organizational skills close to non-existent. The judge at one trial described the antics of one plot leader as “buffoonery” that was “positively Shakespearean in its scope.” It is a characterization that could be applied much more broadly.

The new demon group is the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also called ISIS). Alarmed exaggeration is again both rampant and unwise. Sen. Dianne Feinstein has insisted that “the threat ISIS poses cannot be overstated” — effectively proclaiming hyperbole on the subject to be impossible. And Sen. Jim Inhofe, born before World War II, has claimed that “we’re in the most dangerous position we’ve ever been in” and that ISIL is “rapidly developing a method of blowing up a major U.S. city.”

Outrage over the tactics of ISIL is certainly justified, as is concern about the menace it presents in the Middle East. But fears over the danger the group poses to domestic security in the United States have been overblown to unjustified proportions to the detriment of our politics.

ISIL does not deserve as much credit for great military prowess as many people are willing to grant them. The group’s ability to behead defenseless hostages certainly should not justify the pervasive fear of terrorism afflicting so many Americans. The unique circumstances that contributed to its most important military advance, the conquest of the city of Mosul in Iraq in 2014, are unlikely to be repeated. ISIL’s original idea was to hold part of the city for a while in an effort, it seems, to free some prisoners. The defending Iraqi Army, trained by the American military at enormous cost to U.S. taxpayers, simply fell apart, abandoning both its weaponry and the city itself to the tiny group of seeming invaders.

After its fortuitous advances of 2014, the vicious group’s momentum has been substantially halted and reversed. It has alienated just about everybody, and, on close examination, its once highly vaunted economic capacity — particularly of the smuggling of oil and antiquities — may end up proving to be as illusory as its military prowess. It has cut pay for its fighters in half, and it has to work hard to keep people from fleeing its lumpen caliphate. This degradation will likely continue.

ISIL has two avenues by which it might be able to inflict damage within the United States. The first is from militants who have gone to fight with the group and then sent back to do damage. However, very little of that has occurred so far, and it is far more likely to happen in Europe than in the United States.

The second avenue involves the possibility that potential homegrown terrorists will become inspired by ISIL propaganda or example. The group has and will surely continue to take credit for mayhem caused by people with little or nothing to do with it. ISIL could still provide inspiration to death cult sycophants in the United States and elsewhere, but this is likely to decline as the group’s military progress in the Middle East, once so exhilarating to would-be jihadists, is stifled. There are signs this process is already well under way. In 2015, there were 14 ISIL-inspired plots in the United States. Thus far in 2016, there have been but two. And there has been a pronounced decline in the number of Americans seeking to go abroad to join the group.

There has also been a trendy concern about the way ISIL recruits using social media. However, as several analysts have pointed out, the foolish willingness of would-be terrorists to spill their aspirations and their often childish fantasies on social media has been, on balance, much to the advantage of the law enforcement officials seeking to track them.

Although al-Qaeda scarcely presented anything that could be considered to be a “threat” to the United States after 9/11 (except for its repeated, and repeatedly unfulfilled, proclamations of dire intent in its incessant videos), public opinion has continued to be alarmed. During the decade after 9/11, there was little change in the percentage of people saying that they worried that they might become a victim of terrorism, that they expected an attack “causing large numbers of Americans to be lost” to occur “in the near future,” that the terrorists remained capable of launching “another major attack,” or, despite the expenditure of over a trillion dollars on homeland security, that they felt safer than before 9/11.

This sense of alarm, needless to say, has scarcely been dampened by the rise of ISIL, which captured attention not with anything on the scale of 9/11, but with the disgusting online beheadings of some American captives in 2014 — a prime example of the group’s mindless propensity to engage in behavior that is counterproductive to its goals. Indeed, by the spring of 2016, fully 77 percent of Americans had come to deem the group to present “a serious threat to the existence or survival of the US.”

Those are the kind of numbers that terrorize politicians, bureaucrats, and the media, lead to knee-jerk alarmism and irresponsible spending, and impel into action those with products, services, and schemes for which there seems to be a market. In that sense, perhaps terrorism does present something of a threat after all.

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